

POLITICO OP-ED: JOINT PURCHASING PUTS THE NATION FIRST

A joint purchasing board would better align the interests of the services with those of the nation

Joint purchasing puts the nation first

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By U.S. Rep Jim Cooper

Perhaps the toughest job in government is getting more value for our defense dollars. Do our troops really have what they need? Did the Pentagon get ripped off when it paid the bill? Will we be ready for the next threat, the next conflict and the next war?

We've tried to reform Pentagon purchasing 131 times since World War II. The latest effort came just last month with the Weapon Systems Acquisition Reform Act of 2009. The bill made necessary changes but has not corrected the fundamental problem in defense purchasing.

The Pentagon bureaucracy is so vast that people have trouble seeing what's really happening inside.

For example, there are 50,000 private-sector contractors whose job is to oversee a much larger number of additional private-sector contractors. The organizational charts and acronyms are mind-boggling. No wonder they call the Pentagon the Puzzle Palace.

The fundamental problem is that the military services, rather than the secretary of defense, are still making purchasing decisions. Two decades ago, after pressure from Congress in the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, the services learned to fight jointly, but they still have not learned to purchase jointly. Just as joint war-fighting is a force multiplier, joint purchasing could be, as well.

Don't get me wrong. The services have the expertise that we need to make wise purchasing decisions. But this expertise usually puts the services' interests ahead of the national interest. I would move the services' acquisition staffs into the office of the secretary so that purchasing decisions can be made jointly.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is trying to reorder Pentagon spending priorities, but his type of intervention is rare, not yet successful and, without institutional changes, likely to be overturned. The services have overwhelming control over the current process and will never relinquish it voluntarily. For the past 40 years, the Army, Navy and Air Force have divvied up defense spending equally, regardless of the threats to the nation. How could our service shares remain constant (plus or minus 2 percent) during the Cold War, hot wars and no wars?

This 40-year truce between the services has led to stagnation, making it harder to get the mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, up-armored Humvees and body armor to our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's also forced some services to stay attached to weapons programs longer than they should in an effort to keep their budget share intact. And when creativity is truly needed, as with pilotless drones, the services have sometimes turned their backs on innovation.

The irony of Pentagon purchasing is that some of the most patriotic men and women in America are trapped in a system that fails to put the country first. Sometimes the interests of the services coincide with the national interest, but this doesn't happen frequently enough. Sometimes brave colonels and captains put the national interest first, but they know they are risking their careers to do so.

A joint purchasing board under the direction of the office of the secretary of defense would better align the interests of the services with those of the nation. Warriors who have returned from joint commands would no longer have to revert to favoring their own service. Purchasing decisions could be vetted more carefully and for the benefit of all.

Cooperation is not as radical as it may seem. President Harry Truman lamented that he wished the services would fight the enemy as hard as they fought each other. President Dwight Eisenhower advocated that all general officers wear a purple uniform common to all the

services in order to limit the harmful effects of rivalries.

Congress is constitutionally responsible for providing for the nation's defense, and acquisition needs our attention. Twenty-three years after Goldwater-Nichols, we should make joint purchasing a reality.

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